For Once, Solution of the Crime Baffled Police . . .

A True B.C. Police Story by Ce

The Case of the POISON

ANYONE WHO HAPPENED to peek into the Assize Court in the old Vancouver Courthouse on the afternoon of Oct. 29, 1905, might have seen a small woman, dressed in a dark coat and skirt, standing in the prisoner's box awaiting the verdict from the newly-entered foreman of the jury.

The accused woman was 55-year-old Mrs. Ether Jones, whose black hair, severely drawn back to a bun, tendered to accentuate the pallor of her features. If she seemed a somewhat frail and tragic-looking little figure as she stood nervously clutching the dock rail, still there was more to Mrs. Jones than met the eye.

She had been charged with theft, but theft of a peculiarly offbeat type—which is perhaps why her case had offered so many difficulties; difficulties that entailed endless argument between counsel, who in turn required reference to innumerable authorities.

The whole thing started a week or two before at 1284 Melville Street, in Vancouver's West End, in a house Mrs. Jones rented from a retired sea captain, W. W. Sprague. Living with her at the time were her 24-year-old daughter, Mrs. Theresa Jackson; her 27-year-old nephew, Harry Fisher, and a young bachelor who boarded with them, called Excell. Theresa's husband, Tom Jackson, was a prospector who'd been up north since April but was expected back in Vancouver about Nov. 1. Theresa Jackson, a tall, good-looking young woman was dark, like her mother. Her absent husband was a big, good-natured, happy-go-lucky type who had been by turn miner, trapper and prospector. Generous, Tom Jackson never took life very seriously. In their three years of marriage nothing had occurred to mar the Jacksons' happiness.

Harry Fisher was a moody sort of youth, of medium build, with red hair and a sprinkling of freckles across his nose, and he worked as a bookkeeper at a Granville Street grocery, contributing little to the household expenses. His background was a bit of a mystery, but like his Aunt Esther, he hailed from the state of Ohio.

Excell, the boarder, kept to himself, and his acquaintances were outside the Jackson-Jones circle.

Mrs. Jones always handled the monthly rent payments, which landlord Sprague usually called for in person. Early in October he made his monthly visit and Mrs. Jones ushered him into the living room. While he sat writing a receipt, she went to get the money, amounting to $45. Returning to the room, she took the receipt out of his hand, then blandly ordered him out of the house.

"Go on, get out!" she said peremptorily, pushing the astonished Sprague into the hall and out the front door.

Maybe Sprague anticipated some unorthodox move like this, for when he knocked at the door he had asked Mrs. Jones if his son, a Vancouver physician, could come in with him. The son was standing on the sidewalk. Mrs. Jones didn't consent, so only Sprague entered.

Rankling at the barefaced trick he'd suffered, Sprague saw his lawyer, and the upshot was a charge of theft.

IN COURT the arguments over the stolen piece of paper were interesting. It was a document, but did it have value? To whom?

"She took it out of my hand," said Sprague.

"Nothing of the kind. He gave it to me," said Mrs. Jones, and swore she'd handed over $45.

Sprague said he never laid hands on the money, never saw it. The jury, confused, deliberated an hour and a quarter and confessed they couldn't reach agreement, and the case was put over to the next assize.

Mrs. Jones, released on bail, left the courthouse muttering, "The nerve of him, trying to swindle a poor widow!"

And Sprague bitterly commented to his friends in the corridor, "She's a crook, that's what she is!"

Mrs. Jones' husband, by the way, had died three years before.

Two weeks later the argument about the rent receipt was completely engulfed in a much more serious development in the Jackson-Jones household. Tom Jackson, by this time, had returned to Vancouver on the Boscowitz steamer Vadso, bearded and travel-stained after months of backpacking in the northern bush. On Saturday night, Nov. 11, he remarked to his wife that he felt out of sorts, and had a headache.

Fred Jones . . . What did he know? Why did he run?

"What you need is a dose of Epsom salts," said his matter-of-fact spouse, and added, "I'll put the packet out on the kitchen table and you can take some when you get up in the morning."

She headed for the bathroom cupboard to get the packet, and Jackson must have pulled a wry face at the thought for he called to her, "and put a bottle of beer alongside it. It'll take the taste out of my mouth."

It was next morning about 9.30 when Jackson got up, and in the kitchen mixed some salts in a glass of water and drank the mixture; then he opened the bottle of beer, filled the glass and drank that as well. Theresa came by at the moment and remarked, "I'll keep you company with the other half of the bottle." And she poured the remainder of the beer in another glass and drank with him. While this was going on, mother-in-law Jones bustled around the kitchen getting breakfast ready. Harry Fisher and Excell were still upstairs, asleep.

SUDDENLY Mrs. Jones noticed Jackson clutch the kitchen table, his face contorted with pain. He passed a shaky hand over his ashen face and mumbled something about feeling unwell. Then he took a couple of unsteady steps toward the door, gave a groan and slumped to the floor. Theresa also showed signs of feeling unwell, and subsiding into a kitchen chair, clutched herself around the middle and bowing her head toward her knees, groaned in pain.

With a quick glance of concern from one to the other, Mrs. Jones rushed from the kitchen and mounting the stairs screamed, "Harry! Come quick! Tom and Tess are dying."

In a matter of a minute or so Fisher and Excell bounded down the stairs and quickly grasping the situation, Fisher phoned immediately to Dr. Herbert W. Riggs, who arrived at the house within 15 minutes.

According to Dr. Riggs, when he arrived Jackson still lay on the floor in a state of convulsion, with occasional agonizing spasms racking his huge frame. The doctor paced his pulse at a 100, and noted the prone man's clenched jaws and difficult breathing.

"The thought of tetanus flashed through my mind," he remarked later to a colleague.

Dr. Riggs administered a stiff morphia injection, then turned to Theresa Jackson, who lay on a couch in the living room, moaning and gagging, but conscious. He was thus able to use a stomach pump and washed her stomach out. He noticed her pulse was normal, and figured that as she wasn't having her husband's convulsive spasms. There was a good measure of hysteria in her symptoms.

There's no doubt that Dr. Riggs had his hands full, and he thought so, too, for he summoned in a colleague, and as they worked on Jackson, giving him artificial respiration, they noticed the patient's throat muscles contracting until finally, despite all they could do, asphyxia terminated his agony, just one hour and 30 minutes after he took the fatal dose of Epsom salts. Mrs. Jackson's stomach contents yielded a yellowish fluid, in line with Mrs. Jones' statement to Riggs that she'd given her daughter a stiff dose of mustard and water. The fluid was kept for analysis and Mrs. Jackson, given a sedative, was put to bed.

PUZZLING to Dr. Riggs was the circumstance that, if husband and wife were stricken at the same time from the same cause, why didn't they exhibit parallel symptoms? The mustard and water could possibly cause Theresa to clasp her stomach, which she did occasionally, but Jackson's symptoms of convulsion, rigidity and choking, were absent.

The city police and the coroner were notified, and soon Detectives J. A. Preston and D. D. McIntosh appeared on the scene to take statements from all concerned, and possession of the empty beer bottle, and five remaining full ones in a paper bag. They also took with them the glasses used by Jackson and his wife, together with the mixing spoon and the package of Epsom salts. After investigating the contents of the bathroom medicine closet they took their leave.

While Dr. Arthur Poole performed the post-mortem on Jackson, an analytical chemist went to work on the exhibits. Poole came up with the report that Jackson's body contained about ten grains of strychnine, "enough," he said, "to kill half a dozen men." He also reported that he'd fed pieces of tissue to two dogs who promptly died.

The police canvassed every drug store in Vancouver but apparently no member of the Melville Street household had bought any strychnine. The chemist reported that the beer in the capped bottles was unadulterated, and the glasses, the teaspoon and the package of Epsom salts were all free of any trace of strychnine or any other type of poison.

He did, however, make one important discovery: Mrs. Theresa Jackson's stomach contents contained no trace of strychnine or other poisonous substance.

Meantime, of course, the police had searched the house from top to bottom but found nothing of material interest. Nor could they find that Jackson had any enemies, or other than a happy married life. He had no great financial difficulties, and was insured for $2,500. Theresa Jackson was beneficiary.

For the second time in a month a jury was puzzled about happenings at 1284 Melville Street; this time it was a coroner's jury, and they brought in a verdict that Thomas Jackson had been poisoned by some person or persons unknown.

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